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Why Political Consumerism?

When Products Become Political

How should we understand the impact of an E-mail exchange between an individual consumer requesting that the word sweatshop be put on his customized shoes and a multinational corporation in the global garment industry? This now classic Nike Email Exchange reached millions of people worldwide and turned its initiator, a university student, into a global media celebrity. Some people reacted by considering the exchange an important new way of making political statements and influencing powerful global actors. Others were either outraged by it or saw it as a childish and silly way of dealing with the serious problem of offshore employment policy and the effects of economic globalization on developing countries. Yet it appears that everyone who knew about it was affected, including Nike who decided to debate its labor practices in offshore factories with this young man on American national television.1

What explains public interest in this event and public reaction to it? Why are consumer campaigns like Responsible Coffee, Clean Clothes, and No Sweat and institutions called Forest Stewardship Certification and Good Environmental Choice being established? The short answer is that these endeavors have been initiated to influence the commodity chain of products. Their mission is to ensure that goods produced domestically and globally are traded on the basis of fairness, good labor practices, and sustainable development.2

A more penetrating answer is the subject of this book, which understands the examples and the questions they raise as representing more profound changes in how we think about politics and economics and the relationship between our public and private lives. I begin to answer these questions in this chapter, which takes its theoretical point of departure in changes in our political landscape and challenges to our conventional view of politics and political participation.

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Most of us have been taught to participate in politics by voting in elections and by becoming involved in political parties and civic associations. The E-mail exchange as well as the consumer campaigns and institutions mentioned above imply a different view of citizen engagement in politics. They show that there is a political connection between our daily consumer choices and important global issues of environmentalism, labor rights, human rights, and sustainable development. There is, in other words, a politics of consumer products, which for growing numbers of people implies the need to think politically privately. This politicizes what we have traditionally conceived as private consumer choice and erases the division between the political and economic spheres.

People who view consumer choice in this fashion see no border between the political and economic spheres. For them, the market is an arena for politics. They also believe that their private choices have political consequences. They see an interconnectedness of their private and public acts. It is no longer possible for them to make a sharp distinction between the virtues most important only for politics, community, or private life. Everyday conduct of individual citizens is not just a matter for private life but increasingly important from the local to the global level for politics, community, and the character of the marketplace. The metaphor “footprints” captures the essence of this interconnectedness. We leave ecological, ethical, and public footprints or consequences for others as we go about our seemingly daily private lives. Awareness of this, as in the examples above, implies an acknowledgment that everyday choices and acts by individuals play an important role for the future of political, social, and economic life. In short, every person is part of global responsibility-taking. Or in the postmodern language of scholars of global risk society “...individuals can feel themselves to be authors of global political acts...”

The phenomenon of consumer behavior as political involvement and global responsibility-taking goes under many guises. It has been called consumer activism, ethical consumerism, and socially responsible investing. The term political consumerism is used in this book. It represents actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices. Their choices are based on attitudes and values regarding issues of justice, fairness, or noneconomic issues that concern personal and family well-being and ethical or political assessment of favorable and unfavorable business and government practice. Political consumers are the people who engage in such choice situations. They may act individually or collectively. Their market choices